DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 989 FL 019 566

AUTHOR Shore, Arnie
TITLE Perspectives on Proficiency: 1985.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 8p.; In: "Perspectives on Proficiency: Curriculum & Instruction. Dimension: Language '84-'85." (see FL 019 565). p1-7.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Planning; *International Studies; *Language Proficiency; *Language Role; *Policy Formation; *Public Policy; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

As concerns about educational planning mount, the perspectives of the foreign language teaching profession will come face to face with national policy agendas, and there may be conflict. The profession must be aware of perspectives other than its own at the same time that it sets and maintains its own goals. Public debate has arisen about the state of foreign languages and international studies and their role in national policy. The profession will have difficulty in pursuing the idea that foreign language study should be boosted largely for national defense purposes; it ignores other important foreign language curriculum issues and objectives. A more defensible viewpoint is that adult language competencies are a pressing national goal. This approach requires a unified and concerted effort on the profession's part to systematically study and disseminate effective teaching practice to promote foreign language proficiency. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Gartman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED336989

1 Perspectives on Proficiency: 1985

Arnie Shore
Exxon Education Foundation
New York, New York

Keynote Address

It was August when I wrote this speech. In my small corner of the world, August 1985 was noteworthy for several reasons:

—New York was bone dry even as it bathed in humidity.

—Exxon Education Foundation was in its "slow" period even as we prepared energetically for a major review of the Foundation's grants programs.

—I had just attended a meeting cosponsored by Ford and Exxon on a national agenda for foreign language training and study, even as a national agenda for all of international studies was under way as part of the effort to surface a detailed, well-argued, and carefully presented case for a national foundation for international studies.

The moral I drew in August was this: From nature to foundations to the affairs of professions and nations, there are these "natural contradictions" that one must contend with. Put differently, when singlemindedness seems to be the call of the day, it does not seem possible to be altogether singleminded in purposeful action. Having to contend with water shortages one must contend also with an abundance of humidity. Having to deal with administrative catch-up during a slack time, one must turn attention to long-term program planning. And while one would like to be of single purpose in pursuing the ends of improved language training and technique, even this is not possible in a singleminded way as the national agenda for international studies marches ahead and carries with it foreign language studies.

Perhaps this is as it will always be. Competing needs, goals, and values characterize our modern lives and organizations. But if this is so, perhaps we can make use of the competing priorities to help set our singleminded purposes as high as possible while learning better how to deal with the competing calls of the day.

FL019566

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Of the arenas I mentioned above, the last—foreign language training—is of course the most compelling. For even as you undertake the good and sufficient work of employing proficiency principles in your teaching, national agendas insinuate their perspectives. One could imagine a cry for a return to what I'll term the new basics: for us, an insistence that we need more certified testers, more engagement of proficiency testing in curricular development, and that we leave it to proficiency, itself a powerful and driving concept, to push all of us in the direction of teaching usable skills in the variety of ways in which we choose to teach them.

The reason the topic of this address is important—I have the chance to remind you that you invited me to discuss perspectives on proficiency—is because the perspectives of the language profession will meet head on the perspectives of national policy and education planners whose views may indeed differ from your own. Moreover, unless you take account of perspectives other than your own, you will utter a complex irony—a singleminded call of "Let's get back to the future." (Imagine wasting that perfectly good phrase on something like a movie title.)

To seek the future directions of the proficiency movement and guide it as only the working professionals in language can is your purpose. But, as the political scientists would say, agenda setting is the call of the day. To join in that task—to join your perspectives with those of others while maintaining your singleminded, highminded goals—that is your purpose, too, I believe.

The agenda for foreign language studies is being set in the broad terms of international studies. To wit, there's talk of:

1. the creation and maintenance of pools of specialists with a high degree of competency in international affairs and a correspondingly high level of proficiency in one or more relevant languages. I underscore, as I am sure you do, the large place of language in this agenda item.

2. the creation and maintenance of knowledge about international affairs in general and so-called country knowledge in particular. Language holds the key, especially with regard to a deep understanding of countries, regions, and, if I dare say so, areas. (Aside: that area studies are country studies will some day be admitted by all those who profess to understand such areas of inquiry.)

3. the creation and maintenance of international linkages among international specialists worldwide. Again, language is in the forefront of making such sharing of intellectual resources possible.

4. enhancement of the general education of U.S. students to include opportunities for international study. I'd only comment here that study and travel abroad is truly enhanced by language proficiency put to specific and

definite use and that surely requires a thoroughgoing orientation to proficiency.

And then we come to foreign language proper. Here I'd like to rest for the next several moments. For while it is clear that language plays an integral part in each of the components of the national international studies agenda just listed (there's something about "national international studies agenda" I should perhaps ponder further), the exact nature of the language components of the agenda must be identified carefully if we are to reach a satisfying conclusion on how to present our needs and purposes.

It is just so much easier to assess the value of foreign language in all things international, as I've just done, than to adduce the foreign language agenda in and of and for itself.

I will borrow quite heavily from that sweaty day in August when several illustrious members of your fraternity joined in a truly constructive collegial exercise in the basement of the Ford Foundation (to me, "basement" sounds so much more down to earth—should I say down in the earth—than "brass-laden board room"). There we pondered what the national foreign language agenda would be, especially if one posed the possibility of a national center, or centers, for foreign language pedagogy.

The jury of your peers is still out—literally—writing their opinions. Suffice it to say that the interim outline of their thinking is available, based on my notes and filtered through my lenses. It is this work of your peers on a perspective not quite your own to which I will further add my own two cents, and that straight away.

The key linking of a national agenda for foreign language training to a national agenda for international studies is to define the context in which we can present to an interested public the case for language support. In the past, our intellectual leadership has promoted a national defense rationale. To promote and defend the national interest, we were told, one must support foreign language training. To a degree, that worked, but not of late. It was flawed in its singularity of purpose (there goes that theme again), for we should have added at a minimum the needs of educational institutions to integrate foreign language study with their own curriculum, rather than state, or at least imply, that it would be others, notably national defense institutions, that would benefit. And we should have noted that the individuals who study foreign language would themselves benefit immediately from gaining proficiency. They would have in hand a major tool of continuing education, one that gives them very special access to the unfolding story we call international affairs.

Two points. First, the defense strategy may be outdated. It's a difficult and not altogether satisfying rationale for academics to pursue. And, as it

was pursued, it failed to link the several priority reasons just alluded to for supporting foreign language training. This means that it failed to offer a program in several usable and workable parts. If you will, singlemindedness does not a program make.

New leadership suggests that adult language competencies are a pressing national goal. In some ways, this restates the national defense argument, for national defense institutions partake of the advanced language skills of adult practitioners. More importantly, however, this rationale states that as a nation we must be committed to foreign language proficiency for a larger and larger proportion of the adult population so that, on a continuing basis, we are more prepared as a populace and a nation to face our international futures.

The second point is that the differences in the two approaches, or perspectives, if you will, are not trivial. The adult competency approach provides a proximate goal for educators and a long-term goal for our nation. It represents an educator's best hope, not a politician's best formulation. And it provides a number of pedagogical consequences that we can deliberate and develop. It is comfortable, I believe, and it is ours: useful to us, we know, and useful to others, we trust.

An adult competency approach to a national proficiency-oriented foreign language agenda embodies the following:

1. defining the scope of the term. When we say adult language competency we bespeak the range of interests from maintenance and retention of language skill to the organization of the education system. All of these are involved in gearing up for foreign language training for truly large numbers for the truly long haul.

2. measuring language competencies in a standard way. Here we must face the fact that we have, for oral proficiency, standardized on testers, not on tests. We need to consider reliability measures for testers, and we need to move on to consider the variety of validity measures for the tests themselves. We need also to consider the combination of proficiency and achievement, especially to relate our work to the specialized language programs. In a word, we need to push on with our understanding of testing and progress to the unending work of pursuing a common metric.

3. applying our testing philosophies to the evaluation of the ways we teach foreign language. That's not in the hope of finding the magic bullet of foreign language training. It is in the hope of rigorously defining what we do as we teach. Behind the technique labels we employ are the practices we actually engage in along with the emphases we place on them and the order in which we employ them. We need to understand what teaching components we hold in common and how they contribute to specific proficiency outcomes so that we can better share pedagogical practices.

Then it follows that, as educators, we'll want to isolate replicable training components—those that can be practiced by most all of us mortals—work them in experimental classrooms, train teachers in their use, and disseminate widely information on techniques and outcomes.

And we'll want to do several other things, which I'll checklist in more rapid order:

—We'll want to take account of learning styles.

—We'll want to address higher levels of proficiency materials and curricular development.

—We'll want to remain truly international in our perspective as we learn about the proficiency requirements of the less commonly taught languages and how they relate to the more commonly taught tongues. (Put in proficiency test terms, were Gertrude Stein among us she might quip that for the present a two is not a two is not a two).

—We'll want to undertake surveys of adult language usage in order to understand better where the needs and receptivities are for more proficient use of the languages, and the implications the data hold for training.

—We'll want to locate successful language programs and learn what we can from close observation of actual practice.

—We'll want to study the costs of a variety of language pedagogies in order to better understand what works with what populations at what cost and with what outcomes. To this end, we'll need to make common cause with methodological experts who, together with us, can design truly applied studies that loop back easily and pointedly to inform better teaching practice.

One reason for the rapid fire listing is to help make a major point. So often we hear a speaker exhort a profession. The immediate result is an elevation of adrenalin and perhaps an elevation of spirit, too (this holds, I would suggest, whether or not you agree with the speaker's statement). Not long thereafter, the fall off is dreadfully noticeable. Enthusiasm is spent. It's back to the job with not much change evident in oneself, one's peers, or one's profession.

Exhortation, to be sustained in its singleminded purposes, must link with elaborated structure. There's no way that each of us, on his or her own, can support the agenda just laid out, or ask most all of the proficiency questions that concern us as a profession, or engage fellow professionals in lasting dialogue about the unfolding future of proficiency unless we find a structured way to help sustain our lifelong interest in how better to teach foreign language. Yet, structures are imperfect. There may already be too many. They take scarce professional time and they require substantial money resources. But if a case can be made that the requirements of the proficiency movement are several, complex, and compelling, that no one of

us—individually or organizationally—is quite prepared to undertake in a coordinated fashion the several activities listed above, then with some hesitation born of practical experience and some great hope born of professional commitment, we ought surely to consider an elaborated structure to support the systematic study and dissemination of effective pedagogical practice in foreign language training.

With the help of the Ford and Exxon Education Foundations, we've asked your colleagues to do just that: to start a series of forays into the structured requirements of the proficiency movement based on an unfailing concern for pedagogy, that is, how we teach and how we can teach better. By the end of summer 1986, we hope to have collected the wisdom of your peers.

This brings me, of course, to the third of my August travails—the preparation we engaged in to present to our foundation's trustees our program plans for the future. The hard work of the foundation's staff paid off in terms of high quality conversation with trustees on issues as diverse as the structural reform movement in precollegiate education, cost/financing/access issues as they relate to private and public education, the so-called preservation problems of the nation's major research libraries, and the proficiency orientation in foreign language training. Using the examples cited, in some ways it's easier to make the case for the first three issues because for the time, they own the immediate present. There is a marked change in the demographics of precollegiate education, and this calls forth great concern for the ability of those already heavily burdened to make use of a pressing opportunity to change teaching practice and school structures along the lines advocated by Sizer and Goodlad. The cost differential between private and public post-secondary education nears a 5:1 ratio on average, and the preservation problems facing our libraries stagger the senses. In comparison, we—you and I—seem to be saying that people ought to know foreign languages proficiently for some rather indefinite set of reasons. If you will, the indefiniteness is uneven. What proficiency achieves for our schools, our enterprises, and our nation—that's what trustees consider when they ponder the relative priorities of competing claims on scarce resources—and about that we sometimes have difficulty making the case in plain English.

Let me try to tie things together in a paragraph and then sound a final note. My purpose here today is to make use of the national agenda perspective to help us consider the variety of directions we must travel to seek and achieve the full promise of proficiency. Stated differently, agenda setting can be a time to set our sights high in a disciplined presentation of what we are committed to do as a profession. Done honestly and intelligently, we engage in a mature public policy exercise in which we

provide a useful plan for ourselves and a convincing agenda for others. As I see things, the ratio of adult competency and the several directions of our work, including further test development and surveys of receptivity to proficiency-based training, grow developmentally out of the good and solid start of the proficiency movement. We should continue to work from what we know best—teaching—and we should venture a future whose stages and phases we can envision in detail because teaching remains at the heart. Our claims of benefitting others should be circumspect and organic, not farfetched and fanciful. Ours is an enterprise for the long term, and phrased carefully and with conviction, we will be able to convince others that the long term deserves a chance.

One final note. In inviting a foundation officer to address you, you are engaging in the very useful practice of sharing perspectives with one who would serve your profession. The service tie between foundation and education means to me that we recognize the inherent differences in our vantage points and the deep commonality in our purposes. I am enlivened by your pedagogical concerns and you, I trust, are benefitted from the cooperative efforts of foundations to understand your needs and respond. I can say, truly, that this address, then, is part of an ongoing conversation with you. Sometimes it is confined to your highly qualified leadership, sometimes it is broadened to larger groups, as I find here today. Be sure to know that while I have been glad to share my perspectives with you for these few moments, I am happer to hear you share your perspectives with me over much longer periods of time. The result of your actions will be better informed service, surely one of the highest goals of all foundations.